Elizabeth Hale, "Entry on: H2O: Just Add Water by Jonathan M. Shiff", peer-reviewed by Miriam Riverlea and Elżbieta Olechowska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/505. Entry version as of July 12, 2026.

Jonathan M. Shiff

H2O: Just Add Water

Australia (2006)

TAGS: Sirens

We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	H2O: Just Add Water
Studio/Production Company	Jonathan M. Shiff Productions
Country of the First Edition	Australia
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2006
First Edition Details	2006–2010
Running time	4 seasons of episodes; 78 episodes, each of 22 minutes
Awards	2008 — Australian Film Industry Awards: Best Visual Effects; 2008 — Nickelodeon Australian Kids' Choice Awards: Best TV Drama Show; 2009 — Logie Awards: Most Outstanding Children's Program.
Genre	Fantasy fiction, Humor, Teen films, Television series
Target Audience	Crossover (Children and young adults)
Author of the Entry	Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au
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Creators

Jonathan M. Shiff (Director, Producer)

Jonathan M. Shiff is an Australian television director and producer. He graduated from Swinburne University's Film and Television School. Since 1988 his company (Jonathan M. Shiff Productions) has produced nearly 20 programs for children and families, many with magical, mythical, or scientific themes. These programs include *H2O: Just Add Water*, *The New Adventures of Ocean Girl*, and *Wicked Science*. A recent collaboration with Netflix makes several of his shows available globally (e.g. *Mako Mermaids: An H2O adventure*) In 2001 he was awarded the Australian Centenary Medal in the Queen's New Year Honours List: for services to Australian film production and to Australian society.

Sources:

Profile at the imdb.com (accessed: October 1, 2018).

Official website (accessed: October 1, 2018).

Bio prepared by Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au

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Additional information

Casting	Cariba Heine: Rikki, Claire Holt: Emma, Phoebe Tonkin: Cleo, Angus McLaren: Lewis, Indiana Evans: Bella, Luke Mitchell: Will.
Sequels, Prequels and Spin-offs	*H2O: Mermaid Adventures* (animated series; 2015); *Mako: Island of Secrets* (spin-off series, 2013–2016).

Summary

A popular series for tween and teen viewers, *H2O: Just Add Water* was screened internationally for four years (from 2006 to 2010). It begins when teenage girls from Australia's Gold Coast, Rikki, Cleo, and Emma, swim at the full moon in a pool hidden inside a mysterious volcanic island. When they return to land they discover they have been transformed. If a drop of water touches them, they transform into mermaids. Most episodes revolve around the sit-com challenges of their newfound identities; as the girls spend time with their families, go to school, work after-school jobs, make friends, fall in love, and contend with social rivalries at school and more. Their friend, Lewis, a boy with scientific tendencies, is in on the secret, and spends time researching their newfound abilities. Moral topics are common to many television programs for young adults: issues such as sibling rivalry (Chloe's little sister); divorce (Rikki's parents are divorced); competitiveness (a champion swimmer, Emma can no longer compete if her mermaid identity is to remain secret).

Most episodes have a comic structure, in which a problem is posed, reaches a crisis point, and then is resolved. The fear of discovery is present in every episode, be it from a curious little sister, or a grasping scientist. The girls solve different problems in each

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episode—how to attend a pool party with the 'popular' kids, or do the dishes, or work at a marine park without getting wet. Treasure hunters, explorers, developers, romantic rivals, and the 'mean girls' at school, all pose threats to the girls' secret identities.

Each girl has a magical power over water: Cleo can move and levitate water; Rikki can boil it and turn it to steam; Emma can freeze it instantly.

Classical mythology is not omnipresent in the series; but occasional episodes, featuring 'Miss Chatham,' emphasise mythical aspects. Miss Chatham is a former teen mermaid, who lives on a houseboat, and appears to the girls around the time of the full moon to warn them of dangers. If the girls see the full moon in water, mysterious things will happen. Emma becomes flirtatious, and kisses the boy she likes; Cleo suddenly gains the singing powers of a siren (not luring them to their death, but alluring them to follow her) ; Rikki sets fire to things with a glance. Each of these episodes touches on the mythlore of the mermaid, and the magical aspects of metamorphosis, and the idea of the mermaid possessing magical powers. For the most part, these mythical elements connect with aspects of female sexuality, desire, and the uncanny aspects of mermaids.

The threat of discovery is a constant in the drama of each episode. Discovery would mean the end of freedom, and a life under scrutiny from scientists, or the fear of exploitation by unscrupulous businesspeople. Rikki, Cleo, and Emma use their powers for good—their superhuman abilities to swim fast, for example, or the strength of their powerful mermaid tails, enable them to save the day on various occasions (all while risking discovery).

Analysis

H20: Just Add Water is a loose adaptation of the myth of the mermaid. Mermaids are present in many cultures, associated with the mysteries of the ocean, and the powers of female sexuality. Classical elements in this series include episodes that allude to the entrancing singing of the Sirens; and the powers of mermaids, their association with female sexuality and feminine powers. While sirens are more frightening creatures, luring men to their deaths, the *H20* mermaids are generally more seen as helpers of the sea: strong environmental themes pervade the series: as creatures of the sea, these teenage mermaids work to protect the ocean, and to save the mysterious Mako Island from

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unscrupulous scientists or developers.

Overall, the series represents a form of children's entertainment: targeted at early teen and pre-teen children, especially girls. It emphasises the power of girls to solve their own problems, and to achieve their goals, to defy expectations and challenge boundaries. Typical tween- and teen- themes such as responsibility, work ethic, honesty, family relations, sibling rivalries, friendship, school rivalry, and romance predominate. The character of Lewis provides comic relief, and a scientific perspective on magical happenings, balancing the magic with realism. It is notable that scientific figures and developers are often male, in contrast with the girls' magical femininity (with the exception of a blonde-bombshell scientist, Dr Linda Denman, who acts as a potential rival for Lewis's affections). The mysterious origins of the girls' mermaid-hood draw on elements of mythology and the supernatural associated with women: the moon; water are associated with female powers. Notably lacking is any connection to Indigenous Australian myths, which may be because the show is produced with a generic quality to appeal to mainstream overseas audiences.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Sirens
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Character traits Coming of age Environment Friendship Gender, female Magic powers Nature Romance Sexuality Siblings Water

Further Reading

Potter, Anna and Rachel Davis, "The Gold Coast on Screen: Children's Television Selling Brand Australia in International Markets," *International Journal of TV Serial Narratives* 3.1 (2017): 27–40.

Ward, Susan and Anna Potter, "H2O Just Add Branding: Producing High Quality Children's TV Drama for Multi-Channel Environments",

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